

The Medical Students' Societies and Medical Students' Publications

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Abstract

The rich corporate life of the medical student and the medical students' societies at our medical school (at the present National University of Singapore) is generally unappreciated by its graduates and regrettably, even more unknown to the medical student of today. The present generation of medical students of NUS do not know of their rich history. We have published documentation of student activities from the founding of the medical school in 1905 till the establishment of the then University of Malaya in 1950, reviewed herein. Materials presented after 1950 were gathered from personal communications from key players in the students' societies and from editors of the medical students' publications.

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Introduction

Information on the life of the early medical undergraduates of our medical school has been well documented in the publication *Fifty Years of Medical Education in Malaya 1905-1955*,¹ on which this review is largely based.

The medical students' societies underwent several name changes *pari passu* with the name changes of its alma mater. The first was the Medical Students' Recreation Club from 1906 (within a year of the start of the medical school) to 1922 but it became defunct. This is contemporaneous with the first Graduates' Association of 1921 (although the first batch graduated in 1910) to 1923 which had also become defunct, but was revived in 1923 as the Singapore Medical College Graduates' Association.

The period of the Medical Students' Recreation Club lasted from 1906 to 1922. The club was founded primarily to offer sports facilities and the College acquired a playground at the nearby Singapore Railway Station. Until 1916, the College principal was the president; in that year he became the patron and Dr Chen Su Lan, the vice-president of the Medical Students' Recreation Club. The club functioned almost entirely under the direction of the College staff, which prompted Professor CJ Smith, former professor of surgery to remark: "*The students here, compared with those at home, were too gentle and timid, and their manners too good for medical students.*" Apart from sports, there were a few literary and social functions.

In 1920, a student magazine, *The Medico*, was first published, but ceased publication after 4 years.

In 1922, the Recreation Club was reconstituted as the Medical College Union (MCU), with Dr C Subrahmanyam as the first president and the College principal as the patron. The MCU was exempted from having to register under the Registration of Societies Ordinance and its existence depended on its good behaviour with the Registrar of Societies. In the early period of the MCU from 1922 to 1929, the Union made rapid strides, especially in sports. With the donation of a private library from Mr See Tiong Wah, literary activities took place sporadically. Social gatherings were still few and far between but the first College dance was held during Christmas in 1923. In 1924, when the students' strike was called, the Union came out in force to demonstrate the *esprit de corps* of the medical students. In 1926, the MCU Medical Society (a splinter group) was inaugurated but it became defunct after 2 years (personal communication – Chee Phui Hung and K Shanmugaratnam).¹

In 1930, the first issue of the Medical College Union magazine was published. It was a reincarnation of the former *Medico*. Between 1930 and 1949, 11 volumes of this magazine were published.

An unusual episode then took place. In 1930, when the name of the Graduates' Association was changed to the Alumni Association of King Edward College of Medicine

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(to reflect the new name of its medical school, which had been changed to the King Edward VII Medical School in 1913 and again to the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1920), the defunct MCU Medical Society was also renamed the King Edward VII College of Medicine Medical Society to keep in step with its alma mater.

Even before the Japanese Occupation, there had been growing agitation to phase out colonial names when some segments of the student body dropped the name of King Edward VII and reverted to the name of its parent body, the Medical College Union.² It was also called the Singapore Medical College Union and the Medical College Students Union, but was popularly referred to as MCU. MCU was the all embracing supreme union, representing the Colleges' medical, dental and pharmacy students.

The College authorities were furious with the students' union for dropping the name of King Edward VII but could not reverse their decision. In a diplomatic solution by the then Vice-Chancellor later, the old FMS Hostel, which was demolished for redevelopment, was renamed the King Edward VII Hall, when the new residential hall (to replace FMS Hostel) was officially opened exactly 40 years later by the Chancellor and first Prime Minister of Malaysia Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra on 30 November 1957, who also called it Asrama Edward VII.²

There were 2 other student societies, which also included students from Raffles College. In 1946, the Literary and Debating Society was established. For a number of years, this society published a successful paper called *The Cauldron*. It also sponsored highly successful activities in the nature of talks, discussions, study circles and some controversial debates. In 1947, a Music Society was founded, with its own choir and orchestra.

In 1950, the name of the King Edward VII College of Medicine was changed to the Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya with the establishment of its university status. The retention of the name of King Edward VII at the King Edward VII Hall was an appropriate atavistic throw back to our colonial heritage, as indeed the original medical school had been founded in the reign of Edward VII and the King Edward VII Memorial Foundation had made a bequest to endow a chair in physiology there. However, in a desire to remove colonial overtones, the King Edward VII Hall was abbreviated by the students to KE VII Hall or just KE Hall, as it is often referred to.

By 1951, the University of Malaya was already founded. In anticipation of the formation of the University of Malaya, the MCU merged with Raffles College Union to form the Medical and Raffles College Union. Medical student Chee Phui Hung was the president of the merged union which drew up a constitution for the pending University of Malaya Students' Union (UMSU). It included in its membership

students of all the faculties. It is a statutory organisation, created by the law of the land and is recognised by its inclusion in the University Enactment as an important and integral part of the University (personal communication – Chee Phui Hung).

When UMSU came into being, the Medical and Raffles College Union also dissolved itself. But the old King Edward VII Medical Society was revived in 1949 and reconstituted with a new name as the Medical Society of the University of Malaya. This revitalised Medical Society (Medsoc) was to cater to the needs of the medical students, more so to continue the long traditions of its illustrious predecessor (the MCU), as stated in this clause from its constitution: "*The Management Committee of the Society shall preserve the memory of the students of King Edward VII College of Medicine who lost their lives on 14th February 1942.*" The Medical Society has grown to be the largest and most active student academic society of the University. In its early years, it sponsored talks by professional and technical experts, organised seminars and discussion groups and published an annual called the *Gazette of King Edward VII Medical Society*. The Medical Society, working under a new constitution in 1949, is currently (2005) managed by its 56th Executive Committee (the consecutive numbering being carried forward annually) (personal communication – President, 56th Executive Committee, Medical Society).

But the University of Malaya Students' Union was to be the single unified students' body for the whole of the university. It soon became active in all spheres of student life, organising frequent academic and extracurricular activities, engaging with the university authorities on issues of students' interest, and holding lively debates, games, and social functions. As stated in its constitution, it is managed by a Students' Council. It publishes a regular newsletter, *Organ of the University of Malaya Students' Union*, under printing permit by government. Together with medical student A Mahendran, who was the editor, the author was co-editor of this newsletter in 1957, as appointed by the 9th Students' Council.

In 1950, the Dental Society was established. It publishes a journal, sponsors academic talks and discussions and collaborates with the Medical Society in organising its medical week.

Whatever its name, the medical students' societies were as active as the graduates in the Alumni Association. They organised the Inter-Faculty games with Raffles' College in the days when the Kay Moat Cup in athletics and the Tratman Cup in rugby were keenly contested (until the Medical College and Raffles College merged to form the University of Malaya). The MCU supported the Alumni Association when the latter spearheaded the move for the

Malayanisation of the medical services (personal communication – Chee Phui Hung). MCU also made representations to the Carr-Saunders Commission on Higher Education and Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders credited his informal meetings with the medical students as a factor in the attainment of university status (personal communication – Chee Phui Hung and K Shanmugaratnam).

After its popular Honorary Secretary was killed by Japanese shelling, the MCU was attending to his burial on 14 February 1942 when another 8 medical and 2 dental students were tragically killed. After the war, the Union raised funds and set up a sub-committee (with Gwee Ah Leng and George Tay) to commemorate the war dead. On 14 February 1947, the Union unveiled a bronze plaque, bearing the names of the 11 students who were killed. Thereafter, an annual Remembrance Day was held after prayers, when the Last Post was sounded. The commemoration concluded with an Elocution Contest (opened to all the university students) in the evening.³

In later years, former Medical College Union members (the MCU had ceased to exist by 1949 and was replaced by the Medical Society) called for an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) of the University of Malaya Students' Union (UMSU). There, an earlier ban on ragging, which had been adopted by the general student body, was reversed. However, in 1957, the same Medical Society members, at an Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the UMSU, reinstated it when ragging became abusive.

Fifty years ago, Dr BR Sreenivasan, the editor of the University publication *Fifty Years of Medical Education in Malaya 1905-1955*, wrote about the early undergraduates: "A study of medical undergraduate life over the past 50 years leaves one impressed by the spirit of endeavour and inspiring energy of that small group of undergraduates who each year kept the Union (MCU) going and fought hard against the ever-recurring enemy of student welfare, the apathy of students themselves." Fifty years after Sreeinivasan's comments, the same observation holds true as we commemorate the 100th year of the founding of our medical school in 1905 and its first students' club in 1906. Sreenivasan again: "*The academic life of the medical undergraduates of the Singapore Medical School was in no way different from those of the older medical schools. They all went through the same boredom... the same trepidation... the same discomfort... the same disappointments... Generation after generation of students have pioneered and left us the proud heritage of today – the University of Malaya Students' Union with its multifaceted all-purpose corporate life.*"¹

Student Publications

A complete list of students' publication is not available

as many of the publications were minor or not deposited with the university library or university archives. *The Medico: Journal of the Studies of the King Edward VII College of Medicine* (available in the NUS library) commenced publication after the reopening of the College following the Japanese Occupation.

The Singapore Medical College Union Magazine, organ of the Medical College Union (also available in the NUS library), which commenced publication in 1930 and continued through the Japanese Occupation, was a more serious magazine which carried Annual Reports of the Medical College Union and the Reports of the Alumni Association as well as news on examination successes, college staff changes, and other essays.

The Cauldron, organ of the Medical College Union Literary and Debating Society, first published in October 1949, was started by medical student Chee Phui Hung and carried on by a fellow student Mahathir Mohamad (personal communication – Chee Phui Hung). It was a popular magazine, featuring accounts of students' activities, pranks, anecdotes, essays and cartoons. It was not unlike the also-popular graduates' *Alumni Association Newsletter*, also started by Chee Phui Hung, to which the student writers naturally gravitated upon graduation. The Cauldron was succeeded by the *New Cauldron*, official organ of the Raffles Society, University of Malaya (the successor of the dissolved Raffles College Union to cater to non-medical students), in 1958 (personal communication – Chee Phui Hung and K Shanmugaratnam).

There were other non-medical students' publications but they are not within our review. Suffice it to say that a political spread-sheet called *Fajar*, which appeared in the early 1950s, prematurely ceased publication when a number of student activists were hauled up by the colonial government and charged for sedition.

Naturally, not all students of the medical college were residents in the former FMS Hostel, replaced in 1957 by the King Edward VII Hall (or KE Hall), which was the only residential hall for the medical college and included dental and pharmacy undergraduates. KE VII Hall is a separate entity with its own Constitution, the *University of Singapore King Edward VII Hall Constitution* (available in the NUS library), published in October 1968. KE Hall has its own Junior Common Room Committee, which organises Hall dinners, games, concerts, orientation and other social events for its residents. A Hall Master is appointed from the Medical Faculty staff. The Hall is active in publishing, with its many talented writers, and produces a regular Hall newsletter called *KEV II AN*.

- *The KE VII AN Vol 1 No 1 1967/68*, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of King Edward VII Hall, which opened in 1957.

- *The KE VII AN – 20th Anniversary Issue 1957-1977*, published in 1977.
- *A Souvenir History of King Edward VII Hall to commemorate its 25th Anniversary 1957-1982*. William Chong, editor.
- *The KE VII AN 1957-1987: A Tribute and a Legacy on its 30th Anniversary*. Sailgh Kuma, editor.
- *80 Glorious Years: King Edward VII Hall, National University of Singapore* (to commemorate 80 years of the first FMS Hostel built in 1916). Joyce Lin, editor. 1997.
- *Medical School Days*, by Peter HL Wee, published privately in 1993.
- *Medical Students during the Japanese Invasion of Singapore 1941-1942*, by Abdul Wahab, edited by Cheah Jin Seng, published by the Academy of Medicine, Singapore in 1987.

To my knowledge, 2 other books have been published by medical students:

REFERENCES

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2. 80 Glorious Years: King Edward VII Hall, NUS. In: Lin J, editor. Singapore: NUS, 1996.
3. Singapore Medical College Union Magazine Vol. 9, 1946-1947.